

# The paradox of ineffability

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## ABSTRACT

Saying that *x* is ineffable seems to be paradoxical – either I cannot say anything about *x*, not even that it is ineffable – or I can say that it is ineffable, but then I can say something and it is not ineffable. In this article, I discuss Alston's version of the paradox and a solution proposed by Hick which employs the concept of formal and substantial predicates. I reject Hick's proposal and develop a different account based on some passages from Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystica Theologia*. 'God is ineffable' is a meta-linguistic statement concerning propositions about God: not all propositions about God are expressible in a human language.

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Mystics and mystically minded philosophers have often claimed that God, the Godhead, *nirvana*, the *Dao* or some other object of mystical experience is ineffable, that it cannot be described or put into words. This claim is so deeply connected to virtually all kinds of mysticism that William James declared ineffability to be the first of four essential properties of mystical experience.<sup>1</sup> But there is a severe problem about the statement that God or any other object of mystical experience is ineffable: how can I meaningfully say about something that it is ineffable? For if it were ineffable, I could not say anything about it, not even that it is ineffable. And *vice versa*, if I can say about it that it is ineffable, there is at least one thing I can say about it – namely, that it is ineffable – and then it cannot be ineffable. It seems as if any proposition of the form 'X is ineffable' (I shall call this the *ineffability thesis*) is paradoxical or self-defeating. But if nothing can meaningfully be said to be ineffable, then the ineffable would not be very interesting – because nothing can be said about it. And even worse: All mystical claims about God's ineffability, all theories of God's nature and of mystical experience based on this claim will become pointless, since anything follows from a contradictory statement. So, if mysticism is supposed to have any philosophical meaning, we ought to find a way to resolve this paradox. Is it possible to say that something is ineffable without contradicting oneself? Or is any such utterance self-defeating and analytically false, simply because of the meaning of the term *ineffable*?<sup>2</sup>

## 1. Alston: ineffability

Some of the most important objections to the ineffability thesis can be found in William Alston's classic paper *Ineffability*.<sup>3</sup> Alston begins with a definition of ineffability: 'To say

that God is ineffable is to say that no concepts apply to Him, and that He is without qualities. [...] And this implies that any statement of the form “God is x” is false’.<sup>4</sup> So, claiming that God is ineffable means two things: First, that no predicates apply to God (which is the basic meaning), and second, that all statements, in which something is predicated of God, are false (which is the consequence). From this definition, Alston derives two arguments against the ineffability thesis.

His first argument is actually more of an explanation of the paradox of ineffability based on his definition of the term. If we say that God is ineffable, then we predicate something of God (since we apply the predicate ‘ineffable’ to him), which is impossible according to the definition of ineffability. More precisely, we could put the argument like this:

- (1) If an object *o* is ineffable, then no predicate *F* can be applied to *o*.
- (2) In the statement ‘*o* is ineffable’ a predicate is applied to *o*.
- (3) Therefore, *o* is not ineffable.

Alston’s second argument is a little more subtle.<sup>5</sup> Let us assume it were possible to consistently say that something is ineffable. Then, Alston claims, we are still not saying that some unknown *X* is ineffable, but rather that some conceptually describable thing is, namely God. And since we are using a specific proper name for the ineffable object, we should be able to justify our use of this name by identifying the object in question. Otherwise, there would be no reason to call the object ‘God’. Now, identifying something as God is possible by ascribing certain properties to the object in question, which differentiate God from other objects, like being perfectly good or incorporeal or omniscient. Alston is obviously following Frege’s principle ‘sense determines reference’ here: the properties we use to identify God are the sense of the term ‘God’ and this sense determines its reference and correct usage. But if God is ineffable and it is, therefore, impossible to predicate something of him, we cannot identify him, either, because the name cannot have a sense which determines its reference. And if we cannot identify him, we cannot even understand the name ‘God’. But we do understand and use this name (and the mystic will probably not want to deny that), so God cannot be ineffable.

- (4) A speaker *s* uses a proper name *n* for an object *o* correctly iff *s* is able to name at least one property *F* of *o*, which identifies *o* as reference *o* of *n*.
- (5) If *s* can name *F*, *s* can predicate *F* of *o*.
- (6) Therefore: *s* is using *n* correctly, iff *s* can predicate *F* of *o*.
- (7) Therefore: If *s* is using *n* correctly, *o* cannot be ineffable.

These two arguments are Alston’s reasons for rejecting the ineffability thesis. In addition, he derives two minimal conditions from them, which any adequate interpretation of the ineffability thesis must fulfil: (1) the sentence interpreting the thesis must not itself be a member of the class of sentences which the thesis declares to be ineffable, and (2) a speaker must still be able to identify the object which is said to be ineffable.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. Hick: formal and substantial predicates

The most notable reply to Alston's arguments comes from John Hick. As a part of his pluralist hypothesis, Hick maintains that the Real, which shows itself in religious or mystic experiences across cultures, is ineffable and can only be grasped in categories shaped by our respective cultures and traditions. So, if a Christian mystic experiences a personal God while Buddhists experience the non-personal state of *nirvana*, there is no actual contradiction, since the contradictory predicates only apply to the various *personae* of the Real, not to the Real itself. The Real itself is beyond the categories of human thought and is, therefore, ineffable; our predicates do not apply to it. Hick, being aware of the problems this claim implies, tries to avoid the paradox of ineffability by making a distinction between formal and substantial predicates.<sup>7</sup> Formal predicates tell us nothing about what the Real is like in itself, substantial predicates do. If, e.g. I say about the Real that it is a possible object of reference, then this is just a formal predicate, while saying that it is a person is a substantial predicate. So, with regard to Alston's argument, Hick seems to reject premise (1): It is not the case that no predicates can be applied to an ineffable object – formal predicates *can* be applied and (this is a relevant additional premise, which strangely enough Hick never mentions explicitly) ineffability is a formal predicate. So, Alston's first condition, an interpretation of ineffability which does not run into a self-referential paradox, seems to be fulfilled.<sup>8</sup> But unfortunately there are several reasons why Hick's approach cannot solve the paradox of ineffability.

(a) Formal predicates are still predicates. If by 'ineffable' we mean that no predicates apply to the object in question, then no formal predicates apply to it, either. Given this definition, the statement 'God is ineffable' remains paradoxical even if we accept the distinction between formal and substantial predicates. But maybe this is not what Hick means. Perhaps we should assume that he is including his distinction in the definition of ineffability, so that Alston's premise (1) should actually read:

- (1) If an object *o* is ineffable, then no *substantial* predicate *F* can be applied to *o*.

In this case, granted that 'ineffable' is not a substantial predicate, the paradox disappears. But this solution requires us to significantly alter the original definition of ineffability without giving us any reason to do so (other than that it solves the paradox). Now, of course we may define ineffability in a way that avoids any self-referential contradictions, e.g. by saying that something is ineffable iff nothing can be said about it except that it is ineffable. But this definition in no way explains why 'ineffable' should be an exception, just like Hick's (alleged) definition offers no explanation for the exclusion of formal predicates. We should not accept a different definition unless there are convincing reasons to do so. Moreover, even if we accept the altered definition there are still two questionable assumptions on which it rests: first, that there is a criterion for clearly distinguishing between formal and substantial predicates, and second, that 'ineffable' is itself a formal predicate. These assumptions provide further reasons to reject Hick's argument.

(b) The distinction between formal and substantial predicates is far from clear. It seems as if Hick takes formal predicates to be purely metalinguistic, i.e. describing the

use of the term ‘the Real’ in our language.<sup>9</sup> But the use of a term is already shaped by certain substantial presuppositions. If I say, e.g. that ‘the Real’ can be used as the subject in a sentence, then this should be a formal predicate according to Hick. But at the same time, it tells us something about the nature of the Real, namely that we should think of it as some kind of object or entity (in the broadest sense of the word), in contrast to, say, a property. There are other cases in which it is not clear how to decide whether some predicate is formal or substantial. What, e.g. is the status of ‘real’? Depending on how we understand this term it could either be a metalinguistic predicate explaining the concept of truth a speaker employs in his utterances about reality, or it could be a substantial predicate which differentiates something as part of the real world from mere fictions. So, what makes a predicate formal or substantial at least sometimes depends on the context or the speaker’s intentions. But then, it is not the predicates themselves that are formal or substantial.

(c) Furthermore, even if we accepted the distinction between these two types of predicates in principle, it seems plausible that *no* predicate at all could be a formal predicate in Hick’s sense. For what is it supposed to mean that formal predicates do not tell us ‘what the Godhead in itself is like’?<sup>10</sup> That they do not say anything at all? Obviously not, since a predicate that says nothing about the thing of which it is supposed to predicate something, neither explicitly nor implicitly, simply is not a predicate, it is just noise. But maybe Hick is thinking about predicates which tell us nothing about the nature or essence of the Real? But then, which predicates do tell us something about nature or essence of the Real? Presumably those which apply to it necessarily but not to all objects.<sup>11</sup> So, formal predicates would be those which apply to all objects. Now, maybe there actually are such predicates, although only a few (there is surprisingly little which can be said about all objects of predication, real or fictional – ‘possible’ seems to be a legitimate candidate). But even if there are formal predicates in this sense, what is their point? They obviously cannot tell us anything actually interesting about the thing of which they are predicated, since all they say applies to literally everything else.

(d) This leads to the final objection: even if there are formal predicates, ‘ineffable’ surely is not a member of this class, since the Real is supposed to be different from other entities precisely by being ineffable.<sup>12</sup> Maybe Hick thinks that ‘ineffable’ is a metalinguistic predicate that describes our use of language regarding the Real, no matter what else it might apply to. After all, it merely means that no predicates apply to the Real. But if I say that the Real is ineffable, I am not just describing my use of the term ‘the Real’. Rather, I am implicitly conveying a certain idea of the Real which is my reason for taking it to be ineffable. Using the term ‘ineffable’ again implies substantial assumptions about the Real: it is conceived of as having certain properties which justify the use of ‘ineffable’. But then, ‘ineffable’ is a substantial predicate (at least indirectly).

So, it seems as though Hick’s solution fails: there is no meaningful distinction between formal and substantial predicates, and even if there were, we would not have any reason to think that ‘ineffable’ (or anything) is a formal predicate, and even if it were, this would not solve the paradox of ineffability. We need an alternative solution.

### 3. A Dionysian approach

In what follows, I will try to provide a better solution by outlining an argument which shows that even if Alston's two conditions are met, the ineffability thesis can still be true. The critical step here is shifting the focus from Alston's first premise to the second. The problem is not the definition of ineffability, but the interpretation of the statement 'X is ineffable' itself.<sup>13</sup> Alston assumes that the statement 'God is ineffable' is a predication, in which the predicate 'ineffable' is applied to the object 'God'. But this assumption, from which the whole paradox results, is false. I will now sketch an alternative interpretation of the ineffability thesis (on the basis of some remarks in Pseudo-Dionysius' *Mystica Theologia*) which does not end up in a paradox.

Now, the *Mystica Theologia* is a rather short and rather obscure text and does not appear particularly suited to be the foundation of an argument in philosophy of language.<sup>14</sup> But Pseudo-Dionysius, like many other mystics, believes that God is ineffable and the way in which he explicates the notion of ineffability stands in stark contrast to Alston's interpretation. He writes:

It [the Godhead] is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity [...]. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being.<sup>15</sup>

Here, Pseudo-Dionysius consistently negates all predicates which could in any way apply to the Godhead, positive or negative. It has been argued that this retreat into negativity is pointless,<sup>16</sup> since a negative predicate is still a predicate. If we say that God is neither existent nor non-existent, we are applying to him the complex negative predicate 'neither-existent-nor-non-existent'. But this is a predicate, too, and we must again negate it by saying that it is not the case that God is neither existent nor non-existent, which results in an infinite regress of ever more complex predicates. Moreover, since Frege the distinction between positive and negative predicates is considered spurious: 'heavy' appears to be a positive predicate, 'not light' a negative one, although semantically there is no difference in meaning between the two. But this criticism misunderstands the intention behind Pseudo-Dionysius' negations. He explicitly says that these are not to be understood as negative predications in the standard sense:

Now we should not conclude that the negations are simply the opposites of the affirmations, but rather that the cause of all is considerably prior to this, beyond privations, beyond every denial, beyond every assertion.<sup>17</sup>

So, for Pseudo-Dionysius, the function of the negative predicates is not to deny certain properties of the Godhead. It is rather something wholly different, since the Godhead is ontologically distinct from all entities to which positive and negative predicates can be meaningfully applied.<sup>18</sup> Further in the following, he says clearly:

It is beyond assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its pre-eminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.<sup>19</sup>

This directly contradicts Alston's claim that 'God is ineffable' is a kind of predication. For if it is impossible to predicate anything of God, then this statement cannot be a

predication either, even if its grammatical form suggests otherwise. The double negatives do not aim to apply a complex negative predicate, but rather are an attempt to make us give up the whole process of predication with regard to God.

Consequently, we should drop the phrase ‘God is ineffable’ altogether, since it suggests that there is a certain property of God – namely, his ineffability – which is designated by the term ‘ineffable’. But if we follow Pseudo-Dionysius, this reading is false, because it presupposes that something is predicated of God, which he considers impossible. But then, what does it mean to say that God is ineffable? My suggestion is this: *ineffability is not predicated of God, but rather of propositions about God*. God is not ineffable, propositions about God are. That is, the term ‘ineffable’ can only be meaningfully applied to things which could in principle be expressible – namely, propositions. ‘Ineffable’ is indeed a metalinguistic predicate (as Hick suspected). But contrary to Hick, it does not mean that no predicates apply to a certain object, but rather that some propositions about this object do not fall into the class of propositions we can express.

What is this supposed to mean? As argued above, Alston understands ineffability as implying that no concepts apply to God. Following him, we could understand this in two different ways: either all propositions about God are said to be false, or they are said to be meaningless. So, in a first attempt we could interpret the statement ‘God is ineffable’ as:

(I<sub>1</sub>) All propositions containing the term ‘God’ are meaningless.

This is clearly absurd. The whole concept of propositions about God being meaningless is incomprehensible. What would a meaningless proposition be? Supposedly, a proposition which does not represent any state of affairs – but that is simply not a proposition at all, it is just nonsense. A meaningless proposition is an oxymoron. And even if we were more modest and just spoke of utterances instead of propositions, there is *prima facie* no reason why utterances containing the term ‘God’ should be meaningless. Using the term ‘God’ does not clash with any syntactical or semantical rules of language, so what should deprive these utterances of their meaning? Why should ‘Christians believe that God created heaven and earth’ be meaningless? The only plausible explanation that comes to mind is that God is ineffable – and this, of course, begs the question. Maybe we should try the second option and replace ‘meaningless’ with ‘false’?

(I<sub>2</sub>) All propositions containing the term ‘God’ are false.

Now we got rid of the confusing concept of meaningless propositions, but another problem remains: the thesis itself is paradoxical. The statement that all propositions containing the term ‘God’ are false itself expresses a proposition, which contains the term ‘God’ and so would say of itself that it is false. The paradox returns. At this point, we might be tempted to soften our concept of truth and differentiate, as Jonathan Jacobs suggests, between fundamental and non-fundamental truths.<sup>20</sup> While a fundamental truth reflects the true structure of reality (it ‘carves nature at the joints’), a non-fundamental truth does not without thereby being false. So it is not the case that all propositions containing the term ‘God’ are false; they are merely not fundamentally true.<sup>21</sup> But this only shifts the problem: Are there any fundamentally true propositions about God? If not, how is this any different from atheism?<sup>22</sup> If yes, what about those propositions? Are they ineffable or not? If they are not, then we clearly cannot say that

God is ineffable. But if they are, what does it mean to say they are ineffable if not that they are not fundamentally true? We would still need a definition of ineffability. Therefore, I suggest we keep our concept of truth unaltered and rather counter this objection by reducing the scope of the thesis from a universal to a particular generalization:

(I<sub>3</sub>) Some propositions containing the term 'God' are false.

If only some propositions which contain the term 'God' are false (or ineffable), then it is possible that the thesis itself is not a part of the class of false (or ineffable) propositions, and the paradox cannot arise. Claiming that all propositions containing the term 'God' are false would be odd anyway, since utterances like 'She believes in God' or 'God is an object of religious worship' are clearly meaningful and can be true. But (I<sub>3</sub>) still cannot be right, either. If a proposition is false, its negation must (according to the law of excluded middle) be true. So, if *p* is an ineffable proposition about God and false, then non-*p* must be true: non-*p* is not false and therefore not ineffable. But if non-*p* is effable, why not *p*? This interpretation renders the whole ineffability thesis pointless through a mere technicality. Besides, (I<sub>3</sub>) is completely trivial: Of course there are some propositions which contain the term 'God' and are false (like: 'God is a bicycle') – who would deny that?

The only solution is to accept that the propositions in question are neither meaningless nor false, but simply ineffable. The term 'ineffable' cannot be substituted by other expressions, and ineffability implies neither falsehood nor absurdity. So, by 'God is ineffable' we mean:

(I<sub>4</sub>) Some propositions containing the term 'God' are ineffable.

An ineffable proposition is a proposition which cannot be expressed by any sentence of a particular language. There are two ways to understand this statement: (1) the proposition is ineffable because the language in question does not happen to contain the terms necessary to express it. This still leaves open the possibility that other languages might be able to express the proposition. Understood this way, ineffability is a relative property: something can only be said to be ineffable *in some language*. For example the proposition that your computer has just crashed is effable in modern English, but not in ancient Greek. We might call a proposition which is ineffable in this sense *inexpressible*. (2) The proposition is ineffable because the speaker lacks the concepts necessary to even grasp the proposition, let alone express it. If this lack of concepts is not the result of insufficient knowledge, but of conceptual boundaries of the speaker's cognitive structure, then this proposition will never be expressible for a being with similar cognitive capacities. And if the being is human, there cannot be any human language in which this proposition could be expressed. I will call propositions which are ineffable in this sense *incommunicable*. So, while inexpressible propositions are ineffable due to certain properties of a language (the *terms* available), incommunicable propositions are ineffable due to properties of the mind of speakers (the *concepts* available). Therefore, inexpressible propositions are contingently ineffable (they are ineffable in some language), while incommunicable propositions are necessarily so (they are ineffable in all (human) languages). If a proposition is incommunicable, the speakers in question lack some or all of the concepts required to grasp the proposition. A person who has no knowledge of computers cannot grasp the concept of a computer and therefore cannot express



any thoughts about computers. Of course, sometimes it will be possible to teach a speaker the relevant concept, so that the once ineffable propositions become effable (if this is the case, the proposition was not incommunicable in the first place, but merely inexpressible). But this is not necessarily true in all cases. It is only possible for a subject to learn a concept if the relevant object or property lies within its cognitive capacities. Two-dimensional beings, like the inhabitants of Edwin Abbotts *Flatland*, could never acquire the concept of space. But conceptualization is a necessary condition for linguistic expression: the content of a linguistic expression is a proposition, and propositions are defined as conceptual.<sup>23</sup> So, if a subject has certain mental contents (e.g. experiences) which cannot be conceptualized, then these contents cannot be expressed linguistically. And if there are areas of reality which are not accessible to human conceptual thought due to our essential epistemic boundedness,<sup>24</sup> propositions about these areas will be ineffable. In the case of mysticism, we would know that the proposition has to be about God, since this follows from the boundary conditions of mystical experience, but the proposition itself contains elements which we cannot grasp cognitively. God's ineffability would then result in there being facts about God which cannot be expressed in any (human) language, since our conceptual resources are not sufficient to express them. Our inability to express these facts does not stem from deficiencies of our language, but rather from deficiencies of our mind.

Understood this way, the ineffability thesis can fulfil Alston's two conditions without becoming self-defeating. The first condition states that the thesis itself must not be part of the class of propositions to which it refers. This is clearly the case, since the thesis only claims that some propositions containing the term 'God' are ineffable, not that all of them are. Therefore, the thesis itself may well be one of the others.

The second condition demands that a speaker using the term 'God' must still be able to identify the referent of this term, even if it is ineffable.<sup>25</sup> This condition, too, can be met, if we accept that there are at least some expressible propositions about God (and why should there not be?) and that these propositions contain enough information to identify some being as God. Among these identifying propositions could be that God is the object of mystical experience, that he is perfectly good, or holy, or that the experience of his presence will move us deeper than anything else. It could also be something as simple as: that God is what I just experienced and that my master told me it was God. These propositions may suffice to identify something as God (depending on how high our standards for identification are), even assuming that not every proposition which contains the term 'God' is expressible.

#### 4. Two objections

- (a) This interpretation is not faithful to the mystic's intentions – Mystics usually say that nothing can be said about God, not just that some things cannot be said.

This objection assumes that it is a core tenet of mystical philosophy that nothing can be said about God, since he transcends our cognitive and linguistic capacities. If this really is what the mystic is saying, then yes, my account will not be compatible with this position. But it is not plausible to assume that radical ineffability of all propositions about God is what the mystic has in mind. If God really were absolutely ineffable in this



way, the mystic should never utter even a single word about him, but rather remain completely silent. Mystics, as Gellman remarks laconically, have never been good at this.<sup>26</sup> Admittedly, mystics do occasionally say that nothing can be said about God, but their actions suggest otherwise. The claim that nothing can be said about God is usually found embedded in elaborate discussions of this very God.<sup>27</sup> And if in doubt, we should pay more attention to what the mystics actually say than to what they want us to hear. And rightly so: not only will the assumption of absolute ineffability lead us directly into the paradox; there is also simply no reason to believe that something is either completely ineffable or not ineffable at all. There is nothing wrong with assuming that some propositions containing the term 'God' are expressible for us, while other propositions from the same class are not (because they are about aspects of divine nature which are not cognitively accessible to us).

The real difficulty lies in demarcating the boundary between effable and ineffable propositions, and this might well be a mystico-empirical question. So, even under this modest interpretation, the ineffability thesis remains interesting, because it implies that there are still some aspects of divine nature which lie beyond the boundaries of language (with all metaphysical and epistemological implications). Our interest in these aspects should not depend on their quantity.

- (b) What exactly do you mean by 'proposition' in (I<sub>4</sub>)? Propositions are the contents of sentences – how could there be an ineffable proposition?

Propositions are usually identified by a that-clause following a verb which describes some kind of mental state like believing, thinking, experiencing, etc. This seems to imply that propositions are linguistic entities, insofar as they are contents of expressible statements. I would not deny that. Propositions are abstract objects representing a state of affairs, and by representing I mean that it is possible that there is a conscious being which mentally represents them. So, for every proposition *p* it is possible that there is some being *s* which is able to have a mental content that *p*. But this being must not necessarily be human. Propositions are the contents of sentences, but not all possible sentences (and all possible representations of states of affairs) are expressible in a human language. Why? Because propositions are structured; they are composed of elementary mental representations, or concepts.<sup>28</sup> If our human ability to form concepts is limited, then it is conceivable that we may have non-conceptual experiences, i.e. experiences of some state of affairs which we cannot conceptualize. But if we lack the relevant concepts to grasp the proposition, we cannot form a sentence to express it – and the result will be an ineffable proposition. So, ineffable propositions should be understood somewhat counterfactually: a proposition *p* is ineffable for some subject *s*<sub>1</sub> iff it cannot be expressed in *s*<sub>1</sub>'s language and it is possible that there is another subject *s*<sub>2</sub> in whose language it is expressible. So yes, all propositions must be expressible – just not by us. This suggests the possibility that there could be other beings with greater cognitive capacities than we who are able to express in their language propositions which are ineffable to us. Ultimately, all propositions are expressible in the language of a cognitively unlimited being – nothing is ineffable in the language of God.<sup>29</sup>

## Notes

1. James, *Varieties*, 380.
2. There is, of course, the option of avoiding the whole problem by not taking the term 'ineffable' at face value (e.g. Gale, 'Mysticism and Philosophy', 474). Calling an experience ineffable would then merely be an expression of its great value and significance for the mystic, not a claim that something is literally ineffable. But dismissing some *prima facie* substantial statement as merely metaphorical or expressive is always the easy way out. We should not take it unless all other options to make sense of the statement fail.
3. A very similar argument can be found in Plantinga, *Does God*, 20ff.
4. Alston, "Ineffability," 507.
5. *Ibid.*, 511ff.
6. See note 4 above.
7. Hick, "Ineffability"; Hick, *An Interpretation*, xxff.
8. Hick does not explicitly try to fulfil Alston's second condition, but it could be argued that the term 'the Real' is chosen specifically for being identifiable only by formal predicates. The highly technical, artificial term 'the Real' does not seem to convey any hidden substantial qualifications like the term 'God'.
9. As his example 'can be referred to' suggests (Hick, "Ineffability," 41).
10. Hick, "Ineffability," 41.
11. For example, 'human being' is a predicate which tells us something about the nature of Socrates, because it is necessary that Socrates is a human being. It could not be true that Socrates is not a human being. But there are other objects which are not human beings. In contrast, 'possible object of reference' applies necessarily to all things and therefore is not a substantial predicate. cf. Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 47.
12. A similar point is made by Kukla, *Ineffability and Philosophy*, 9.
13. That does not mean that premise (1) is true; I still believe that Alston's definition is flawed. The reasons will become clear shortly.
14. What follows is not intended as a fair and faithful interpretation of Pseudo-Dionysius, but rather as an argument inspired by his writings. I doubt if Pseudo-Dionysius himself would have endorsed it.
15. *de Mystica Theologia*, 1048AB.
16. For this and the following argument see Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 288ff.
17. *de Mystica Theologia*, 1000B.
18. For Pseudo-Dionysius, God's ineffability is a result of his being ontologically different from us. And while I agree with him that ontological differences imply ineffability, I do not think the reverse is true: not everything which is ineffable must also be ontologically different from us. Ineffability may be quite mundane: for the colour-blind person, who lacks all concepts of colours, colours are ineffable (or rather, propositions containing colour-concepts are ineffable). But that does not mean that colours belong to another ontological plane. Ineffability is primarily an epistemic matter, not an ontological one.
19. *de Mystica Theologia*, 1048B.
20. Jacobs, "The Ineffable."
21. Jacobs defines God's ineffability as: 'Every true proposition about how God is intrinsically is non fundamental'. (Jacobs, "The Ineffable," 165)
22. Jacobs, 'The Ineffable', 168f. actually addresses this criticism. He argues that the apophatic theist can, unlike the atheist, 'say that for any true proposition about God, it is true because of God'. But if God is the ultimate truthmaker for all propositions about God, then he is part of the ontological inventory of the universe. And then, at least one proposition about God is fundamentally true: there is a God. So, if apophaticism is supposed to be distinguishable from atheism, there will be at least one fundamentally true proposition about God.
23. cf. e.g. Byrne, "Perception," 234. – This holds only for assertoric utterances, of course.
24. This concept is borrowed from Fodor, *The Modularity of Mind*, 120.

25. It is tempting to reject this condition by pointing out that it rests on a questionable view on proper names. Alston seems to presuppose a description theory of reference without further justification. But if we follow Kripke's causal theory of reference and take proper names as rigid designators, then there is no reason to assume that we must be able to describe God and predicate something of him if we want to identify him as an object of our experience. But then again the mystic has to be able to say something about God if he identifies him as being what is given in his mystical experience – namely, that he is what is given in his mystical experience. A causal theory of reference does not require a speaker to be able to describe the object she is referring to, but it implies that as soon as she starts to use the term correctly, she has to be able to give at least a minimal description. So, Alston's second condition still stands: a minimal description of that which is said to be ineffable must at the very least be possible.
26. Gellman, "Mysticism," 3.1.
27. It is noteworthy that a lot of what mystics have to say about God is expressed in metaphors and analogies. For example Eckhart speaks of the 'desert of the Godhead', and Ruysbroek calls God 'the dark silence in which all lovers lose themselves' (quoted from Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 97f.) This is not a mere coincidence: ineffability and metaphor go hand in hand, and for a good reason. If we accept (1) that metaphors have cognitive content (i.e. they can be true or false and are not just a way of expressing one's feelings) and (2) that they are irreducible (i.e. the meaning of a metaphor can never be completely reduced to the meaning of a literal statement), then metaphors can express meanings which would otherwise be inexpressible: they widen the boundaries of our language. We should think of metaphors as quasi-concepts introduced to get a grasp on the things we can perceive, but not express linguistically. So, metaphorical language bridges the gap between our limited conceptual abilities and the vast parts of reality beyond it. Of course, this implies a lot of questions: Why should we believe that metaphors are cognitive, irreducible, or untranslatable? What is a quasi-concept and how does it differ from ordinary concepts? How exactly *can* metaphors bridge the gap between our language and the ineffable? Answering these questions is far beyond the scope of the present essay, and I shall confine myself to just mentioning these issues. They deserve more attention than a halfhearted attempt in a footnote could give them.
28. I am presupposing a Fregean notion of propositions here. But even if we assume a Russellian view, in which propositions are composed of objects and properties, a subject will still have to subsume these objects and properties under concepts to entertain the proposition. So, in both views, expressibility depends on the availability of concepts.
29. Earlier versions of this article have been presented at the GAP.9 conference in Osnabrück and at the Catholic Academy in Berlin. I am grateful to all my commentators on both events, especially Silvia Jonas, Ben Murphy, Thomas M. Schmidt, and Christian Tapp.

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## Notes on contributor

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